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## Is the Church for Sinners or Saints?

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## Is the Church for Sinners or Saints?

### **Abstract**

"Is church for people whose lives are already put-together, looking good and on the right path? Or is church a place for people with problems and struggles, constantly struggling to live up to an ideal that they can never seem to reach, and feeling crushed by their failure to be 'better' than they are? Is church for saints—or for sinners like me?"

Posting about who the church is really for from *In All Things* - an online hub committed to the claim that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ has implications for the entire world.

<http://inallthings.org/is-the-church-for-sinner-or-saints/>

### **Keywords**

In All Things, church, parenting, saints, sinner

### **Disciplines**

Christianity

### **Comments**

*In All Things* is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service](#) at Dordt College.

# Is the Church for Sinners or Saints?

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 [all in allthings.org/is-the-church-for-sinner-or-saints/](https://allinallthings.org/is-the-church-for-sinner-or-saints/)

Neal DeRoo

I lie in church. Regularly.

Sunday mornings are a zoo in my house, as I try to get my 3-year old daughter and 4-year old son dressed up, bundled up, out the door and into church (my wife is already at church teaching Sunday school, so she doesn't have to witness the carnage). Now I know that doesn't seem like such a lot to do, but somehow every Sunday morning seems to involve me yelling at (at least one) kid, dishing out some kind of guilt trip, and manipulating and/or manhandling someone to get them to church on time. It's not nearly as pretty as I'm making it sound.

But once we get to church, we're all smiles and nice clothes, good looking kids and their put-together, on-top-of-things dad joining up with their already-been-serving-the-church mom to sit together as a nice, Christian family. Perfect.

And that's the lie. We aren't perfect, I'm rarely nice (at least to my family), I'm certainly not on-top-of-things (especially in the parenting department), and the clothes we're all wearing won't last five minutes past our getting home from church (unless someone from church is coming over for lunch).

My very presence in church is a lie, because I spend the morning turning myself into someone I'm not for the rest of the week (and trying to force my kids to do the same). We call it 'getting ready' for church, but what are we 'getting ready' for? Why do we have to do something different, something special, to go to church? Can't we come to God's house just as we are?

Maybe it's time to stop 'getting ready' for church, and remember that church is not just for people who are squeaky clean and looking good. Church is not a meeting place for saints—it's a safe haven for sinners. We're in church because we need God, and we need God because we aren't perfect and we can't make ourselves better. Grace is not for the "saved"—it is for those who *need* a Savior.

This is why a major part of many church traditions is the inclusion of a time of confession in the worship service. In traditional reformed church practice, this time of confession comes shortly after the *Call to Worship*. It is God who invites us into church, and we respond by admitting all the ways in which we are too broken, too full of 'issues' and problems to be worthy of entering God's presence. And God responds with the assurance of pardon that lets us know that God already knows of our problems—and wants us anyway. God forgives us our shortcomings—and promises to help work with us on what's broken in our lives. This is often referred to as "God's will for our lives" in traditional reformed worship, and it is there, not as a reminder of how far we have fallen, nor as a demand for us to try harder to be better—but to remind us that God wants better for us than the pain caused by sin.

If Christian worship, at its heart, is a reminder that God doesn't demand perfection, or purity, or suits and ties, dresses and smiles, then why do I feel the need to make my kids 'look good' before we go to church? Why do we spend so much time and energy 'getting ready'?

God promises help to those who will take it, grace for those who need it—and love and acceptance for all. Does the church offer the same? Do we welcome and embrace those whose lives are too messed-up to be able to be "put-together" for Sunday morning service? Are we a place and people of the truth—or do we require people to live a lie in order to be welcomed and accepted? Are we comfortable when people share

real problems with their brothers and sisters in Christ—marriages falling apart, addictions to drugs, work, or pornography, the feeling that God is nowhere to be found in my life right now—or do we look at our feet, silently hoping that this awkwardness will stop soon? Do people have to look a certain way—certain kind of clothes, certain kind of family—to be welcome in our churches? To be a member? To be an elder or deacon?

Fundamentally, this is about what—and who—church is really for. Is church for people whose lives are already put-together, looking good and on the right path? Or is church a place for people with problems and struggles, constantly struggling to live up to an ideal that they can never seem to reach, and feeling crushed by their failure to be ‘better’ than they are? Is church for saints—or for sinners like me?

It is this ‘me-as-sinner’ that gets my kids ‘ready’ Sunday morning—but somehow he doesn’t make it to church. He gets lost somewhere between my house and my church. Maybe I’m too embarrassed of ‘me-as-sinner’ to let him into my church. Maybe I’m hoping that if I look and act better that I’ll somehow become better.

But I’m a sinner. My life is broken in all kinds of ways. And if I pretend to be something else, then whoever shows up at church is not me. Not really. So where am I? I’m out there somewhere, with all the other sinners, lost, searching for love and acceptance. I know that God loves and welcomes us sinners; I’m wondering if the church does the same.

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